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Experimental Cinema in America

LEWIS JACOBS

LEWIS JACOBS has contributed articles on the motion picture to two encyclopedias and to numerous magazines. His book *The Rise of the American Film* is now published in three languages. In Hollywood, aside from his own screen writing, he has taught screenplay technique to new contract writers at Columbia Studios and is now completing a book on the structure and art of the motion picture for Harcourt, Brace.

This article is the first half of an essay which is to appear in a forthcoming book, *The Experimental Film,* a collection of essays on the avant-garde cinema of America, Britain, France, Russia, and other countries, edited by Roger Manvell and published in England by the Grey Walls Press. Part Two: 1941–1947, will appear in the Spring, 1948, issue of the *Hollywood Quarterly.*

(PART ONE: 1921–1941)

EXPERIMENTAL cinema in America has had little in common with the main stream of the motion picture industry.

Living a kind of private life of its own, its concern has been solely with motion pictures as a medium of artistic expression. This emphasis upon means rather than content not only endows experimental films with a value of their own but distinguishes them from all other commercial, documentary, educational, and amateur productions. Although its influence upon the current of film expression has been deeper than is generally realized, the movement has always been small, its members scattered, its productions sporadic and, for the most part, viewed by few.

In Europe the term for experimental efforts, "the avant-garde," has an intellectually creative connotation. But in America experimenters saw their work referred to as "amateur," an expression used not in a laudatory, but in a derogatory sense. Lack of regard became an active force, inhibiting and retarding productivity. In the effort to overcome outside disdain, experimental film makers in the United States tended to become cliquey and in-bred, often ignorant of the work of others with similar aims. There was little interplay and exchange of ideas and sharing of discoveries. But with postwar developments in this field the old disparaging attitude has been supplanted by a new regard and the experimental film maker has begun to be looked upon with respect. Today the word "amateur" is no longer used; it has been dropped in favor of the word "experimenter."

The American experimental movement was born in a period of artistic ferment in the motion picture world. During the decade 1921–1931, sometimes called the "golden period of silent films," movies were attaining new heights in expression. Innovations in technique, content, and structural forms were being introduced in films from Germany, France, and Russia: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Waxworks, The Golem, Variety, The Last Laugh, Le Ballet mécanique, Entr'acte, The Fall of the House of Usher, Emak Bakia, The Italian Straw Hat, Thérèse Raquin, The Passion of Joan of Arc, Potemkin, The End of St. Petersburg, Ten Days That Shook the World, The Man with the Camera, Arsenal, Fragment of an Empire, Soil.*

The "foreign invasion," as it came to be called, enlarged the aesthetic horizons of American movie makers, critics, and writers, and fostered native ambitions. Intellectuals hitherto indiffer-

ent or hostile now began to look upon the cinema as a new art form. Books, essays, articles, and even special film magazines appeared which extolled the medium's potentialities and predicted a brilliant future. Film guilds, film societies, film forums, and special art theaters devoted to showing "the unusual, the experimental, the artistic film" sprang up, so that by the end of the decade the film as a new art form was not only widely recognized but inspired wide enthusiasm for production. Young artists, photographers, poets, novelists, dancers, architects, eager to explore the rich terrain of movie expression, learned how to handle a camera and with the most meager resources attempted to produce pictures of their own. The expense proved so great that most of the efforts were abortive; in others, the technique was not equal to the imagination; and in still others, the ideas were not fully formed, but fragmentary and improvisational, depending upon the moment's inspiration. Consequently, while there was a great deal of activity and talk, hardly any experimental films were completed. It was not until the main current of foreign pictures had waned—around 1928—that experimental cinema in America really got under way.

Two films were finished in the early 'twenties, however, which stand out as landmarks in American experiment: *Mannahatta* (1921) and *Twenty-four Dollar Island* (1925). Both showed an independence of approach and probed an aspect of film expression that had not been explored by the film makers from abroad.

Mannahatta was a collaborative effort of Charles Sheeler, the modern painter, and Paul Strand, photographer and disciple of Alfred Steiglitz. Their film, one reel in length, attempted to express New York through its essential characteristics—power and beauty, movement and excitement. The title was taken from a poem by Walt Whitman, and excerpts from the poem were used as subtitles.

In technique the film was simple and direct, avoiding all the so-called "tricks" of photography and setting. In a sense it was the forerunner of the documentary school which rose in the United States in the middle 1930's. *Mannahatta* revealed a discerning eye and a disciplined camera. Selected angle shots achieved quasi-abstract compositions: a Staten Island ferryboat makes its way into the South Ferry pier; crowds of commuters are suddenly released into the streets of lower Manhattan; an ocean liner is aided by tugboats at the docks; pencil-like office buildings stretch upward into limitless space; minute restless crowds of people throng deep, narrow, skyscraper canyons; silvery smoke and steam rise plumelike against filtered skies; massive shadows and sharp sunlight form geometric patterns. The picture's emphasis upon visual pattern within the real world was an innovation for the times and resulted in a striking new impression of New York.

Mannahatta was presented as a "short" on the program of several large theaters in New York City, but by and large it went unseen. In Paris, where it appeared as evidence of American modernism on a Dadaist program which included music by Erik Satie and poems by Guillaume Appollinaire, it received something of an ovation. In the late 1920's the film was shown around New York at private gatherings and in some

of the first art theaters. Its influence, however, was felt more in still photography, then making an upsurge as an art form, than in the field of experimental films.

Twenty-four Dollar Island, employing the same approach as *Mannahatta* and having much in common with it, was Robert Flaherty's picture of New York City and its harbor. The director had already established a style of his own and a reputation with such pictures as *Nanook of the North* and *Moana.* In those films his major interest lay in documenting the lives and manners of primitive people. In *Twenty-four Dollar Island,* people were irrelevant. Flaherty conceived the film as "a camera poem, a sort of architectural lyric where people will be used only incidentally as part of the background."

Flaherty's camera, like that of Strand and Sheeler, sought the metropolitan spirit in silhouettes of buildings against the sky, deep narrow skyscraper canyons, sweeping spans of bridges, the flurry of pressing crowds, the reeling of subway lights. Flaherty also emphasized the semiabstract pictorial values of the city: foreshortened viewpoints, patterns of mass and line, the contrast of sunlight and shadow. The result, as the director himself said, was "not a film of human beings, but of skyscrapers which they had erected, completely dwarfing humanity itself."

What particularly appealed to Flaherty was the opportunity to use telephoto lenses. Fascinated by the longer-focus lens, he made shots from the top of nearly every skyscraper in Manhattan. "I shot New York buildings from the East River bridges, from the ferries and from the Jersey shore looking up to the peaks of Manhattan. The effects obtained with my long-focus lenses amazed me. I remember shooting from the roof of the Telephone Building across the Jersey shore with an eight-inch lens and, even at that distance, obtaining a stereoscopic effect that seemed magical. It was like drawing a veil from the beyond, revealing life scarcely visible to the naked eye."

Despite the uniqueness of the film and Flaherty's reputation, *Twenty-four Dollar Island* had a very restricted release. Its treatment by New York's largest theater, the Roxy, foreshadowed somewhat the later vandalism to be practiced by others upon Eisenstein's *Romance sentimentale* and *Que viva México.* After cutting down *Twenty-four Dollar Island* from two reels to one, the Roxy directors used the picture as a background projection for one of their lavishly staged dance routines called *The Sidewalks of New York.*

Apart from these two early efforts, the main current of American experimental films began to appear in 1928. The first ones showed the influence of the expressionistic style of the German film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.* Expressionism not only appealed to the ideological temper of the time, but suited the technical resources of the motion picture novitiates as well. Lack of money and experience had to be offset by ingenuity and fearlessness. "Effects" became a chief goal. The camera and its devices, the setting, and any object at hand that could be manipulated for an effect were exploited toward achieving a striking expression. Native experimenters emphasized technique above everything else. Content was secondary, or so neglected as to become

the merest statement. One of the first serious motion picture critics, Gilbert Seldes, writing in the *New Republic,* March 6, 1929, pointed out that the experimental film makers "are opposed to naturalism; they have no stars; they are over-influenced by *Caligari;* they want to give their complete picture without the aid of any medium except the camera and projector."

The first experimental film in this country to show the influence of the expressionistic technique was the one-reel *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra.* Made in the early part of 1928, this film cost less than a hundred dollars and aroused so much interest and discussion that Film Booking Office, a major distribution agency, contracted to distribute it through their exchanges, booking it into seven hundred theaters here and abroad.

A Hollywood Extra (the shortened title) was written and directed by Robert Florey, a former European film journalist and assistant director, and designed and photographed by Slavko Vorkapich, a painter with an intense desire to make poetic films. It was produced at night in Vorkapich's kitchen out of odds and ends—paper cubes, cigar boxes, tin cans, moving and reflected lights (from a single 400-watt bulb), an erector set, cardboard figures —and a great deal of ingenuity. Its style, broad and impressionistic, disclosed a remarkable selectivity and resourcefulness in the use of props, painting, camera, and editing.

In content, *A Hollywood Extra* was a simple satirical fantasy highlighting the dreams of glory of a Mr. Jones, a would-be star. A letter of recommendation gets Mr. Jones to a Hollywood casting director. There Mr. Jones is changed from an individual into a number, 9413, which is placed in bold ciphers upon his forehead. Thereafter he begins to talk the gibberish of Hollywood, consisting of slight variations of "bah-bah-bah-bah . . ."

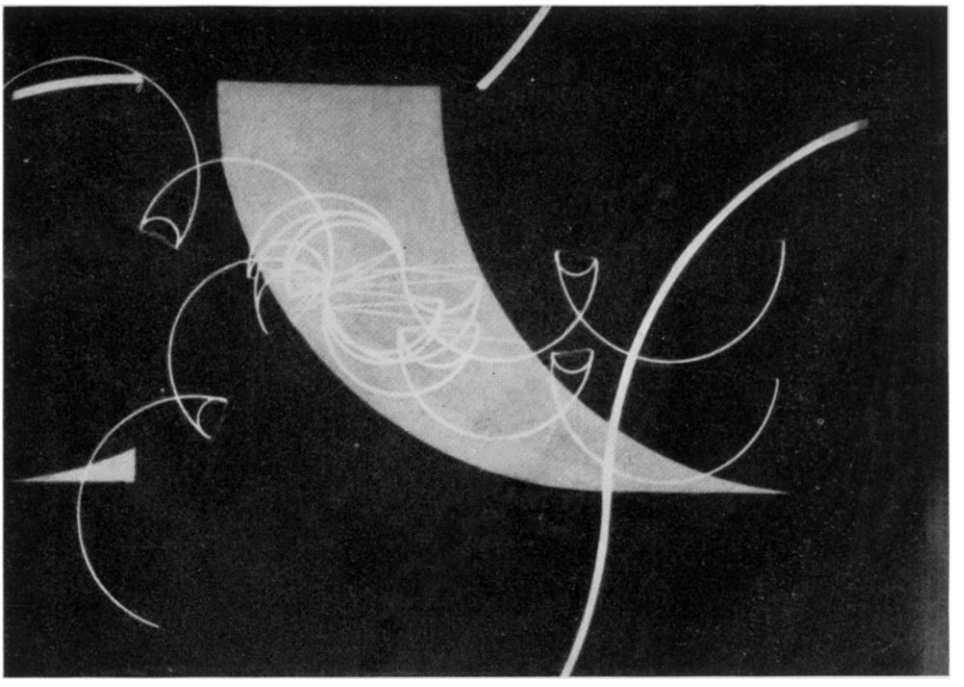
Meanwhile, handsome Number 15, formerly Mr. Blank, is being screen-tested for a feature part. He pronounces "bah-bah-bah" facing front, profile left, profile right. The executives approve with enthusiastic "bah-bahs."

Subsequently, the preview of Number 15's picture is a great success. A star is painted on his forehead and his "bah-bahs" become assertive and haughty.

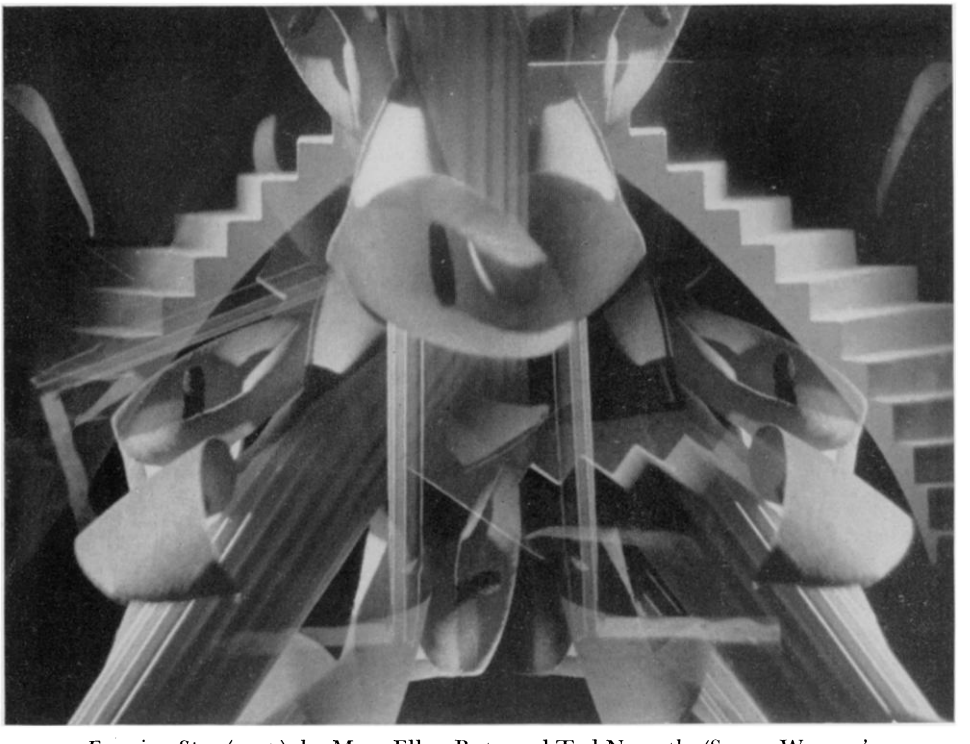
But Number 9413 is less fortunate. In his strenuous attempt to climb the stairway to success the only recognition he receives is "nbah-nbah-nbah"—no casting today. From visions of heavy bankrolls, night clubs, glamour, and fanfare his dreams shrink to: "Pork and Beans—15 cents."

Clutching the telephone out of which issue the repeated "nbahs" of the casting director, Number 9413 sinks to the floor and dies of starvation. But the picture ends on a happy note ("as all Hollywood pictures must end"). Number 9413 ascends to heaven. There an angel wipes the number off his forehead and he becomes human again.

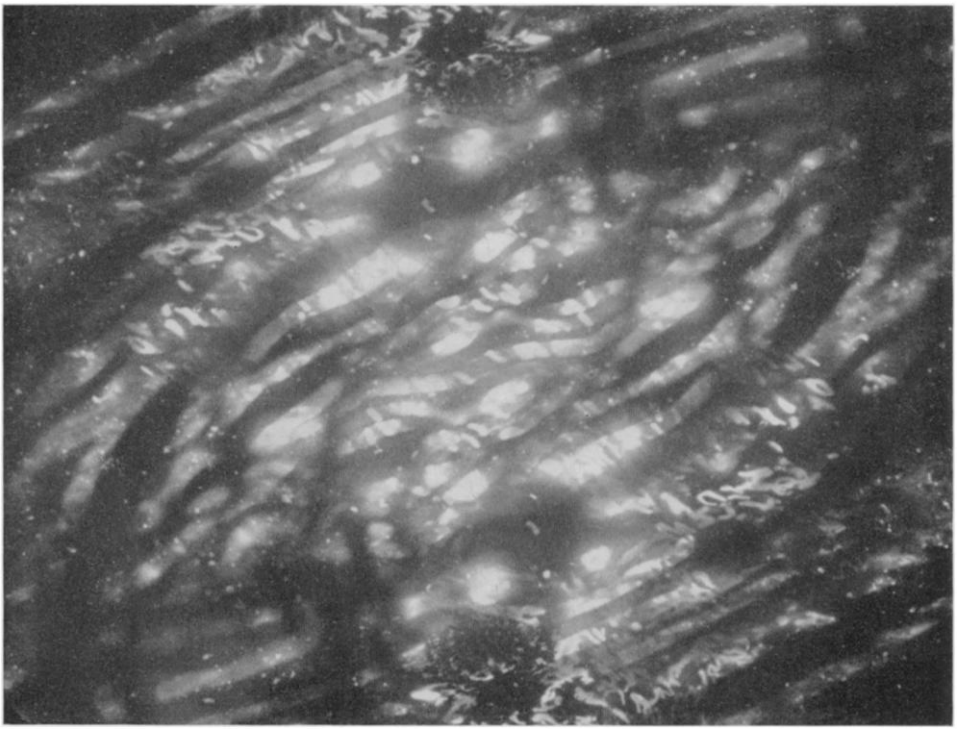
Something of the film's quality can be seen in the description by Herman Weinberg (*Movie Makers,* January, 1929): "The hysteria and excitement centering around an opening-night performance . . . was quickly shown by photographing a skyscraper (cardboard miniatures) with an extremely mobile camera, swinging it up and down, and from side to side, past a battery of hissing arclights, over the thea-



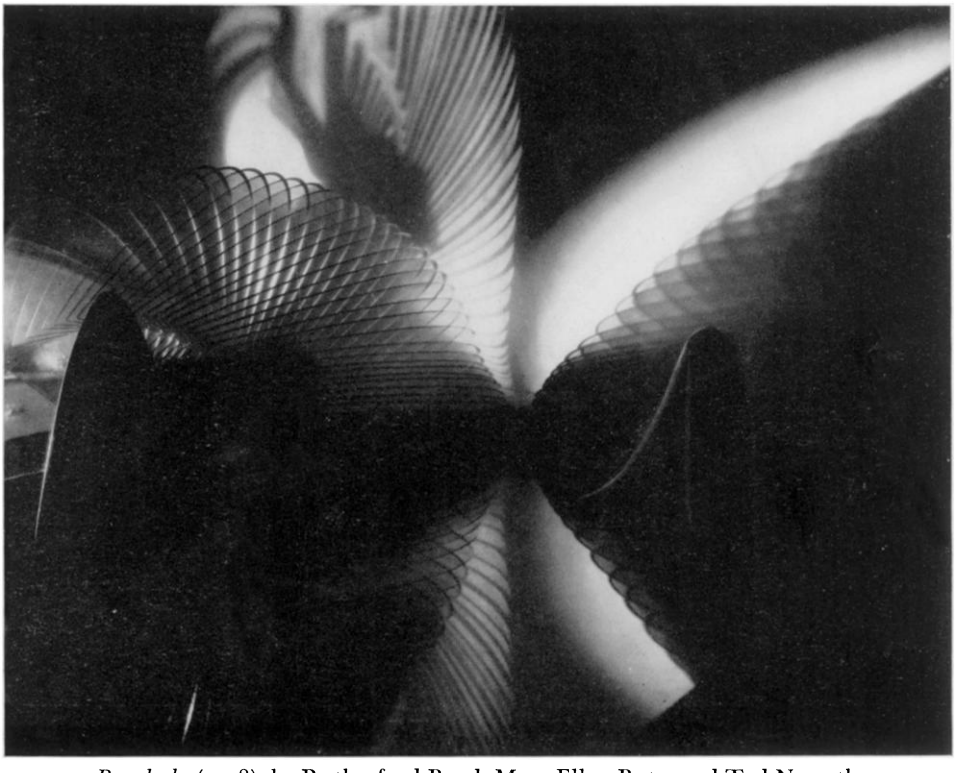
Synchronization (1934), by Joseph Shillinger and Lewis Jacobs.
(Drawings by Mary Ellen Bute.)



Evening Star (1937), by Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth. (Score: Wagner's *Evening Star,* sung by Reinald Werrenrath.)



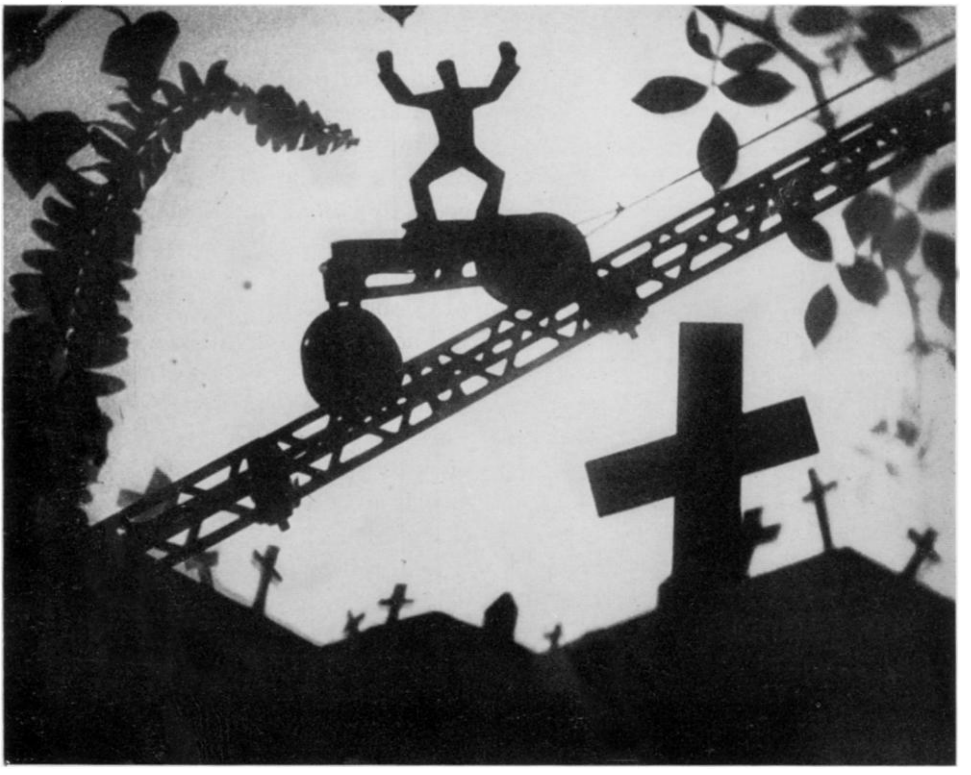
H_2O (1929), by Ralph Steiner.



Parabola (1938), by Rutherford Boyd, Mary Ellen Bute, and Ted Nemeth.

The Lost Moment (1928), by Paul Fejos, with Leon Shamroy and Otto Matieson.

Lot in Sodom (1933–1934), by James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber.



A Hollywood Extra (1928), by Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich.

Dawn to Dawn (1934), by Joseph Berne. Screenplay: Seymour Stern.

ter façade and down to the arriving motor vehicles. To portray the mental anguish of the extra, Florey and Vorkapich cut grotesque strips of paper into the shape of gnarled, malignant-looking trees, silhouetted them against a background made up of moving shadows, and set them in motion with an electric fan."

Following *A Hollywood Extra,* Robert Florey made two other experimental fantasies: *The Loves of Zero* and *Johann the Coffin Maker.* Both films, also produced at a minimum cost, employed stylized backgrounds, costumes, and acting derived from *Caligari.*

The Loves of Zero was the better of the two, with a number of shots quite fanciful and inventive. Noteworthy were the split-screen close-ups of Zero, showing his face split into two different-sized parts, and the multiple-exposure views of Machine Street, the upper portion of the screen full of revolving machinery dominating the lower portion, which showed the tiny figure of Zero walking home.

Despite their shortcomings and their flagrant mirroring of German expressionism, these first experimental attempts were significant. Their low cost, their high inventive potential, their independence of studio crafts and staff, vividly brought home the fact that the medium was within anyone's reach. One did not have to spend a fortune or be a European or Hollywood "genius" to explore the artistic possibilities of movie making.

Appearing about the same time, but more ambitious in scope, was the six-reel experimental film *The Last Moment.* Produced in "sympathetic collaboration" by Paul Fejos, director, Leon Shamroy, cameraman, and Otto Matiesen, the leading actor, this picture (also not studio-made) was saturated with artifice and effects gleaned from a careful study of the décor, lighting, and camera treatment of such German pictures as *Waxworks, Variety,* and *The Last Laugh.* Made up of innumerable brief, kaleidoscopic scenes, it was a vigorous manifestation of the expressionistic style.

The story was a "study in subjectivity," based on the theory that at the critical moment before a person loses consciousness he may see a panorama of pictures summarizing the memories of a lifetime. The film opens with a shot of troubled water. A struggling figure is seen. A hand reaches up "as if in entreaty." A man is drowning. This scene is followed by a sequence of rapid shots: the head of a Pierrot, faces of women, flashing headlights, spinning wheels, a star shower, an explosion, climaxed by a shot of a child's picture book.

From the book the camera flashes back to summarize the drowning man's life: impressions of school days, a fond mother, an unsympathetic father, a birthday party, reading Shakespeare, a first visit to the theater, the boy scrawling love notes, an adolescent affair with a carnival dancer, quarreling at home, leaving for the city, stowing away on a ship, being manhandled by a drunken captain, stumbling into a tavern, acting to amuse a circle of revelers, reeling in drunken stupor and run over by a car, attended by a sympathetic nurse, winning a reputation as an actor, marrying, quarreling, divorcing, gambling, acting, attending his mother's funeral, enlisting in the army, the battlefront. No attempt was made to probe into these actions; they were given as a series of narrative impressions.

The concluding portions of the film were told in the same impressionistic manner. The soldier returns to civilian life and resumes his acting career, falls in love with his leading lady, marries her, is informed of her accidental death, becomes distraught, and is finally impelled to suicide. Wearing his Pierrot costume, the actor wades out into the lake at night.

Now the camera repeats the opening summary: the troubled waters, the faces, the lights, the wheels, the star shower, the explosion. The outstretched hand gradually sinks from view. A few bubbles rise to the surface. The film ends.

In many respects the story was superficial and melodramatic, with moments of bathos. But the faults were overcome by freshness of treatment, conception, and technique, making the film a singular and arresting experiment.

This camera work of Leon Shamroy, then an unknown American photographer, was compared favorably with the best work of the European camera stylists. "*The Last Moment* is composed of a series of camera tricks, camera angles, and various motion picture devices which for completeness and novelty have never before been equaled upon the screen," wrote Tamar Lane in the *Film Mercury,* November 11, 1927. "Such remarkable camera work is achieved here as has never been surpassed—German films included," said Irene Thirer in the New York *Daily News,* March 12, 1928.

But *The Last Moment* had more than superior camera craftsmanship. For America it was a radical departure in structure, deliberately ignoring dramatic conventions of storytelling and striving for a cinematic form of narrative. Instead of subduing the camera for use solely as a recording device, the director boldly emphasized the camera's role and utilized all its narrative devices. The significant use of dissolves, multiple exposures, irises, mobility, and split screen created a style which, though indebted to the Germans, was better integrated in visual movement and rhythm and overshadowed the shallowness of the picture's content.

Exhibited in many theaters throughout the country, *The Last Moment* aroused more widespread critical attention than any other American picture of the year. Most of it was as favorable as that of John S. Cohen, Jr., in the New York *Sun,* March 3, 1928: "One of the most stimulating experiments in movie history... *The Last Moment* is a remarkable cinema projection of an arresting idea—and almost worthy of the misused designation of being a landmark in movie history."

More eclectic than previous American experiments was *The Tell-tale Heart,* directed by Charles Klein. It set out to capture the horror and insanity of Poe's story in a manner that was boldly imitative of *Caligari.* Like the German film, the foundation of the American's style lay in its décor. Angular flats, painted shadows, oblique windows and doors, and zigzag designs distorted perspective and increased the sense of space. But opposed to the expressionistic architecture were the early nineteenth-century costumes, the realistic acting, and the lighting, sometimes realistic, sometimes stylized.

Although poorly integrated and lacking the distinctive style of *Caligari, The Tell-tale Heart* had flavor. Even borrowed ideas and rhetorical effects

were a refreshing experience, and the use of a Poe story was itself novel. Moreover, the general level of production was of so professional a standard that Clifford Howard in *Close Up,* August, 1928, wrote: "*The Tell-tale Heart* is perhaps the most finished production of its kind that has yet come out of Hollywood proper."

Soon after *The Tell-tale Heart,* a second film based on a story by Poe appeared, *The Fall of the House of Usher.* Poe's stories were to appeal more and more to the experimental and amateur film makers. Poe's stories not only were short and in the public domain, but depended more upon atmosphere and setting than upon characterization. What particularly kindled the imagination of the experimenter was the haunting, evocative atmosphere which brought to mind similar values in memorable German pictures which, like *Caligari,* had made a deep impression. Even to novitiates Poe's stories were so obviously visual that they seemed almost made to order for the imaginative cameraman and designer.

The Fall of the House of Usher was directed and photographed by James Sibley Watson, with continuity and setting by Melville Webber. Almost a year in the making although only two reels in length, the production strove to make the spectator feel whatever was "grotesque, strange, fearful and morbid in Poe's' work."

Unlike the previous "Caligarized" Poe story, *The Fall of the House of Usher* displayed an original approach to its material and an imaginative and intense use of the means of expressionism which gave the picture a distinctive quality, setting it apart from the experimental films of the day. From the very opening—a horseman descending a plain obscured by white puffs of smoke—mystery and unreality are stressed. Images sinister and startling follow one upon the other. A dinner is served by disembodied hands in black rubber gloves. The cover of a dish is removed before one of the diners and on it is revealed the symbol of death. The visitor to the house of Usher loses his identity and becomes a hat, bouncing around rather miserably, "an intruder made uncomfortable by singular events that a hat might understand as well as a man."

The climax—the collapse of the house of Usher—is touched with grandeur and nightmarish terror. Lady Usher emerges from her incarceration with the dust of decay upon her, toiling up endless stairs from the tomb where she has been buried alive, and topples over the body of her demented brother. Then, in a kind of visual metaphor, the form of the sister covering the brother "crumbles and disintegrates like the stones of the house and mingles with its ashy particles in utter annihilation," wrote Shelley Hamilton in the *National Board of Review Magazine,* January, 1929.

The distinctive style of the picture was achieved by a technique which showed the makers' assimilation of the values of *Destiny, Nibelungen,* and *Waxworks.* The various influences, however, were never literally followed, but were integrated with the film makers' own feeling and imagination so that a new form emerged. Watson and Webber's contribution consisted in the use of light on wall board instead of painted sets, optical distortion through prisms, and unique multiple

exposures and dissolves to create atmospheric effects that were neither realistic nor stylized and yet were both. Characters were also transformed to seem shadowy, almost phantom-like, moving in a tenuous, spectral world. The entire film had a saturated, gelatinous quality that rendered the unreal and evocative mood of Poe's story with corresponding vivid unreality.

Unfortunately the picture was marred by amateurish acting and ineffective stylized make-up and gestures. Nevertheless it was an outstanding and important independent effort, acclaimed by Harry Alan Potamkin in *Close Up,* December, 1929, as an "excellent achievement in physical materials."

In sharp opposition to the expressionistic approach and treatment was the work of another group of experimenters who appeared at this time. They looked for inspiration to the French films of Clair, Feyder, Cavalcanti, Leger, and Deslaw. Their approach was direct, their treatment naturalistic.

Perhaps the foremost practitioner in this field because of his work in still photography was Ralph Steiner, the New York photographer. Almost ascetic in repudiation of everything that might be called a device or a stunt, his pictures were "devoid of multiple exposures, use of the negative, distortion, truncation by angle, etc.," for the reason, he stated, "that simple content of the cinema medium has been far from conclusively exploited."

Here was a working creed that deliberately avoided effects in order to concentrate on subject matter. H_2O (1929), *Surf and Seaweed* (1930), and *Mechanical Principles* (1930) were produced with the straightforward vision and economy of means that characterized Steiner's still photography. Yet, curiously enough, these pictures in spite of their "straight photography" gave less evidence of concern for content than, say, *The Fall of the House of Usher,* which employed all the "tricks" of cinema. As a matter of fact the content in the Steiner films was hardly of any importance, certainly without social or human values, and was offered solely as a means of showing an ordinary object in a fresh way. Limited to this visual experience, the films' chief interest lay in honest and skilled photography and decorative appeal.

Steiner's first effort, H_2O, was a study of reflections on water, and won the $500 *Photoplay* award for the best amateur film of 1929. "I was interested in seeing how much material could be gotten by trying to see water in a new way," Steiner said, "rather than by doing things to it with the camera." Yet to get the water reflections enlarged and the abstract patterns of shadows, Steiner shot much of the film with 6- and 12-inch lenses. Although it was true that nothing was done to the water with the camera, it was also true that if Steiner had not used large-focus lenses he would not have seen the water in a new way. (The point is a quibbling one, for devices, like words, are determined by their associations in a larger unity. A device that may be integral to one film may be an affectation in another.) H_2O proved to be a series of smooth and lustrous abstract moving patterns of light and shade, "so amazingly effective" wrote Alexander Bakshy in *The Nation,* April 1, 1931, "that it made up for the lack of dynamic unity in the picture as a whole."

Surf and Seaweed captured the rest-

less movement of surf, tides, and weeds with the same sharpness and precision of camerawork. *Mechanical Principles* portrayed the small demonstration models of gears, shafts, and eccentrics in action, at one point evoking a sort of whimsical humor by the comic antics of a shaft which kept "grasping a helpless bolt by the head."

Essentially, all three films were abstractions. Their concentrated, close-up style of photography made for an intensity and pictorial unity that were still novel. They represented somewhat refined, streamlined versions of *Le Ballet mécanique* (although without that historic film's percussive impact or dynamic treatment) and proved striking additions to the growing roster of American experimental works.

Another devotee of French films, Lewis Jacobs, together with Jo Gercon and Hershell Louis, all of Philadelphia, made a short experiment in 1930 called *Mobile Composition.* Although abstract in title, the film was realistic, the story of a developing love affair between a boy and girl who are thrust together for half an hour in a friend's studio.

The psychological treatment stemmed from the technique used by Feyder in *Thérèse Raquin.* Significant details, contrast lighting, double exposures, and large close-ups depicted the growing strain of disturbed emotions. In one of the scenes, in which the boy and girl were dancing together, the camera assumed a subjective viewpoint and showed the spinning walls and moving objects of the studio as seen by the boy, emphasizing a specific statuette to suggest the boy's inner disturbance.

Later, this scene cut to a dance rhythm stimulated Jo Gercon and Hershell Louis to do an entire film from a subjective viewpoint in an attempt at "intensiveness as against progression." The same story line was used, but instead of photographing the action of the boy and girl the camera showed who they were, where they went, what they saw and did, solely by objects. That film was called *The Story of a Nobody* (1930).

The film's structure was based on the sonata form in music, divided into three movements, the mutations of tempo in each movement—moderately quick, slow, very quick—captioned in analogy to music. It used freely such cinematic devices as the split screen, multiple exposures, masks, different camera speeds, mobile camera, reverse motion, etc. In one scene a telephone fills the center of the screen; on both sides of it, counterimages making up the subject of the telephone conversation alternate. The spectator knows what the boy and girl are talking about without ever seeing or hearing them. "Motion *within* the screen as differing from motion *across* the screen," pointed out Harry Alan Potamkin in *Close Up,* February, 1930, "... the most important American film I have seen since my return [from Europe]."

The spirit of the time changed, and as American experimenters grew more familiar with their medium they turned further away from the expressionism of the Germans and the naturalism of the French to the heightened realism of the Russians. The impact of Russian films and their artistic credo, summed up in the word "montage," was so shattering that they wiped out the aesthetic standards of their predecessors and ushered in new criteria. The principle

of montage as presented in the films and writings of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and especially Vertov, became by 1931 the aesthetic guide for most experimental film makers in the United States.

Among the first films to show the influence of Soviet technique was a short made by Charles Vidor called *The Spy* (1931–1932), adapted from Ambrose Bierce's story, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge. The Spy,* like *The Last Moment,* revealed the thoughts of a doomed man. But unlike the earlier film, which used a flashback technique *The Spy* used a *flash forward.* It depicted not the recollections of the events of a past life, but the thoughts of the immediate present, projected as if they were taking place in reality instead of in the mind of the doomed man.

The picture opens with the spy (Nicholas Bela) walking between the ranks of a firing squad. Everything seems quite casual, except for a slight tenseness in the face of the spy. We see the preparations for the hanging. A bayonet is driven into the masonry, the rope is fastened, the command is given, the drums begin to roll, the commanding officer orders the drummer boy to turn his face away from the scene, the noose is placed, the victim climbs to the bridge parapet. Now the drumbeats are intercut with the spy's beating chest. Suddenly there is a shot of a mother and child. At this point the unexpected occurs. The noose seems to break and the condemned man falls into the river. He quickly recovers and begins to swim away in an effort to escape. The soldiers go after him, shooting and missing, pursuing him through the woods until it appears that the spy has escaped. At the moment of his realization that he is free, the film cuts back to the bridge. The spy is suspended from the parapet where he has been hanged. He is dead.

The escape was only a flash forward of a dying man's last thoughts, a kind of wish fulfillment. The conclusion, true to Bierce's theme, offered a grim touch of irony.

In style *The Spy* was highly realistic. There were no camera tricks, no effects. The actors, who were nonprofessional, used no make-up. The sets were not painted flats nor studio backgrounds, but actual locations. The impact depended entirely upon straightforward cutting and mounting and showed that the director had a deep regard for Soviet technique.

Other experimental films in these years derived from the theories of Dziga Vertov and his Kino-Eye Productions. Vertov's advocation of pictures without professional actors, without stories, and without artificial scenery had great appeal to the numerous independent film makers who lacked experience with actors and story construction. These experimenters eagerly embraced the Russian's manifesto which said: "The news film is the foundation of film art." The camera must surprise life. Pictures should not be composed chronologically or dramatically, but thematically. They should be based on such themes as work, play, sports, rest, and other manifestations of daily life.

The pursuit of Vertov's dogmas led to a flock of "ciné poems" and "city symphonies." Notable efforts in this direction included John Hoffman's *Prelude to Spring,* Herman Weinberg's *Autumn Fire* and *A City Symphony,*

Emlen Etting's *Oramunde* and *Laureate,* Irving Browning's *City of Contrasts,* Jay Leyda's *A Bronx Morning,* Leslie Thatcher's *Another Day,* Seymour Stern's *Land of the Sun,* Lyn Riggs' *A Day in Santa Fe,* Mike Seibert's *Breakwater,* Henwar Rodakiewicz's *The Barge, Portrait of a Young Man,* and *Faces of New England,* and Lewis Jacobs' *Footnote to Fact.*

These films were mainly factual—descriptive of persons, places, and activities, or emphasizing human interest and ideas. Some were commentaries. All strove for perfection of visual values. Photography was carefully composed and filtered. Images were cut for tempo and rhythm and arranged in thematic order.

Other films strove to compose sagacious pictorial comments in a more satirical vein on a number of current topics. *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand,* by John Flory and Theodore Huff, which won the League award for 1933, was a comedy of the depression. In a mixed style of realism and fantasy it told a story of an unemployed Negro (Leonard Motorboat Stirrup) who lives in an automobile graveyard and sells apples on a near-by street corner. Being of an imaginative sort, Mr. Motorboat pretends that he rides to work in a vehicle which was once an elegant car but which now stands battered and wheelless and serves as his home. The fantasy proceeds with Mr. Motorboat making a sum of money that he then uses as bait (literally and figuratively) for fishing in Wall Street. Soon he becomes phenomenally rich, only to lose everything suddenly in the financial collapse. With the shattering of his prosperity he awakens from his fantasy to discover that his apple stand has been smashed by a competitor. Called the "best experimental film of the year" by *Movie Makers,* December, 1933, the picture was a neat achievement in photography, cutting, and social criticism.

Another commentary on contemporary conditions was *Pie in the Sky* by Elia Kazan, Molly Day Thatcher, Irving Lerner, and Ralph Steiner. Improvization was the motivating element in this experiment, which sought to point out that, although things may not be right in this world, they would be in the next.

The people responsible for *Pie in the Sky*—filmically and socially alert—chose a city dump as a source of inspiration. There they discovered the remains of a Christmas celebration: a mangy tree, several almost petrified holly wreaths, broken whisky bottles, and some rather germy gadgets. The Group Theater-trained Elia Kazan began to improvise. The tree evoked memories of his early Greek Orthodox background. He began to perform a portion of the Greek Orthodox ceremonial. The other members of the group "caught on," extracting from the rubbish piles a seductive dressmaker's dummy, a collapsible baby-tub, some metal castings that served as haloes, the wrecked remains of a car, and a worn-out sign which read: "Welfare Dep't." With these objects they reacted to Kazan's improvisation and developed a situation on the theme that everything was going to be hunky-dory in the hereafter.

Pie in the Sky was not entirely successful. Its improvisational method accounted for both its weakness and its strength. Structurally and thematically it was shaky; yet its impact was fresh and at moments extraordinary. Its real

value lay in the fact that it opened up a novel method of film making with wide possibilities, unfortunately not explored since.

Two other experiments sought to make amusing pointed statements by a use of montage. *Commercial Medley* by Lewis Jacobs poked fun at Hollywood's advertisements of "Coming Attractions" and its penchant for exaggeration by juxtaposing and mounting current advertising trailers. *Even as You and I* by Roger Barlow, LeRoy Robbins, and Harry Hay was an extravagant burlesque on surrealism.

Just when montage as a theory of film making was becoming firmly established, it was suddenly challenged by the invention of sound pictures. Experimental film makers, like all others, were thrown into confusion. Endless controversy raged around whether montage was finished, whether sound was a genuine contribution to film art, whether sound was merely a commercial expedient to bolster fallen box-office receipts, whether sound would soon disappear.

Strangely enough, most experimental film workers were against sound at first. They felt lost, let down. The core of their disapproval lay in fear and uncertainty about the changes the addition of the new element would make. Artistically, talking pictures seemed to upset whatever theories they had learned. Practically, the greatly increased cost of sound forced most experimenters to give up their cinematic activity.

There were some, however, who quickly displayed a sensitive adjustment to the introduction of sound. The first and probably the most distinguished experimental sound film of the period was *Lot in Sodom* (1933–1934), made by Watson and Webber, the producers of *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It told the Old Testament story of "that wicked city of the plain, upon which God sent destruction and the saving of God's man, Lot," almost completely in terms of homosexuality and the subconscious. The directors avoided literal statement and relied upon a rhythmical arrangement of symbols rather than chronological reconstruction of events. The picture proved a scintillating study, full of subtle imagery, of sensual pleasure and corruption. A specially composed score by Louis Siegel incorporated music closely and logically into the story's emotional values.

Lot in Sodom used a technique similar to that of *The Fall of the House of Usher,* but far more skillfully and resourcefully. It drew upon all the means of camera, lenses, multiple exposure, distortions, dissolves, and editing to achieve a beauty of mobile images, of dazzling light and shade, of melting rhythms, with an intensity of feeling that approached poetry. Its brilliant array of diaphanous shots and scenes—smoking plains, undulating curtains, waving candle flames, glistening flowers, voluptuous faces, sensual bodies, frenzied orgies—were so smoothly synthesized on the screen that the elements of each composition seemed to melt and flow into one another with extraordinary iridescence.

Outstanding for its splendor and intense poetry was the sequence of the daughter's pregnancy and giving birth. I quote from Herman Weinberg's review in *Close Up,* September, 1933: "I cannot impart how the sudden burst of buds to recall full bloom, disclosing the poignantly lyrical beauty of their

stamens, as Lot's daughter lets drop her robe disclosing her naked loveliness, gets across so well the idea of reproduction. Her body floats in turbulent water during her travail, everything is immersed in rushing water until it calms down, the body rises above the gentle ripples, and now the water drops gently (in slow motion—three-quarters of the film seems to have been shot in slow motion) from the fingers. A child is born."

Suffused with majesty and serenity, this sequence can only be compared to the magnificent night passages in Dovzhenko's *Soil*. Like that Soviet film, the American was a luminous contribution to the realm of lyric cinema.

The second experimental sound film of note was *Dawn to Dawn* (1934), directed by Joseph Berne. The screenplay, written by Seymour Stern, was based on a story reminiscent of the work of Sherwood Anderson. A lonesome girl lives on an isolated farm, seeing no one but her father, who has been brutalized by poverty and illness. One day, into the house comes a wandering farm hand applying for a job. During the afternoon the girl and the farm hand fall in love and plan to leave together the next morning. That night the father, sensing what has happened and afraid to lose his daughter, drives the farm hand off the property. At dawn the father has a stroke and dies. The girl is left more alone than ever.

The subject differed from that of the usual experimental film, as from the sunshine-and-sugar romances of the commercial cinema. What it offered was sincerity instead of synthetic emotion. The actors wore no make-up. The girl (Julie Haydon, later to become a star) was a farm girl with neither artificial eyelashes, painted lips, glistening nails, nor picturesque smudges. All the drabness and pastoral beauty of farm life were photographed by actually going to a farm. There was an honesty of treatment, of detail and texture, far above the usual picture-postcard depictions. The musical score by Cameron McPherson, producer of the film, used Debussy-like passages to "corroborate both the pastoral and the erotic qualities" of the story.

The picture was weakest in dialogue. This was neither well written nor well spoken and seemed quite at odds with the photographic realism of the film. Nevertheless, *Dawn to Dawn* displayed such a real feeling for the subject and the medium that it moved Eric Knight, critic for the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* (March 18, 1936) to write: "I am tempted to call *Dawn to Dawn* one of the most remarkable attempts in independent cinematography in America."

Other films continued to be made, but only two used sound. *Broken Earth* by Roman Freulich and Clarence Muse combined music and song in a glorification of the "spiritually minded Negro." *Underground Printer,* directed by Thomas Bouchard and photographed by Lewis Jacobs, presented a political satire in "monodance" drama featuring the dancer, John Bovingdon, utilizing speech, sound effects, and stylized movements.

Two other silent films were made at this time: *Synchronization,* by Joseph Schillinger and Lewis Jacobs, with drawings by Mary Ellen Bute, illustrated the principles of rhythm in motion; *Olivera Street,* by Mike Seibert, was a tense dramatization of the aftermath of a flirtation between two Spanish street vendors.

By 1935 the economic depression was so widespread that all efforts at artistic experiment seemed pointless. Interest centered now on social conditions. A new kind of film making took hold: the documentary. Under dire economic distress aesthetic rebellion gave way to social rebellion. Practically all the former experimental film makers were absorbed in the American documentary film movement, which rapidly became a potent force in motion picture progress.

One team continued to make pictures under the old credo but with the addition of sound—Mary Ellen Bute, designer, and Ted Nemeth, cameraman. These two welded light, color, movement, and music into abstract films which they called "visual symphonies." Their aim was to "bring to the eyes a combination of visual forms unfolding along with the thematic development and rhythmic cadences of music."

Their films, three in black and white—*Anitra's Dance* (1936), *Evening Star* (1937), *Parabola* (1938)—and three in color—*Tocatta and Fugue* (1940), *Tarantella* (1941), and *Sport Spools* (1941)—were all composed upon mathematical formulae, depicting in ever changing lights and shadows, growing lines and forms, deepening colors and tones, the tumbling, racing impressions evoked by the musical accompaniment. Their compositions were synchronized sound and image following a chromatic scale or in counterpoint.

At first glance, the Bute-Nemeth pictures seemed like an echo of the former German pioneer, Oscar Fischinger, one of the first to experiment with the problems of abstract motion and sound. Actually, they were variations on Fischinger's method, but less rigid in their patterns and choice of objects, tactile in their forms; more sensuous in their use of light and color rhythms, more concerned with the problems of depth, more concerned with music complimenting rather than corresponding to the visuals.

The difference in quality between the Bute-Nemeth pictures and Fischinger's came largely from a difference in technique. Fischinger worked with two-dimensional animated drawings; Bute and Nemeth used any three-dimensional substance at hand: ping-pong balls, paper cutouts, sculptured models, cellophane, rhinestones, buttons, all the odds and ends picked up at the five and ten cent store. Fischinger used flat lighting on flat surfaces; Bute and Nemeth employed ingenious lighting and camera effects by shooting through long-focus lenses, prisms, distorting mirrors, ice cubes, etc. Both utilized a schematic process of composition. Fischinger worked out his own method. Bute and Nemeth used Schillinger's mathematical system of composition as the basis for the visual and aural continuities and their interrelationship.

Along with their strangely beautiful pictorial effects and their surprising rhythmic patterns, the Bute-Nemeth "visual symphonies" often included effective theatrical patterns such as comedy, suspense, pathos, and drama in the action of the objects, which lifted the films above the usual abstract films and made them interesting experiments in a new experience.